

Original Paper

Rousing the Revolution: The Role of Rhetoric in the Haitian and Cuban Revolutions

Frank Yan^{1*}

¹ Quarry Lane School, Danville, U.S.

* Frank Yan, Quarry Lane School, Danville, U.S.

Received: June 15, 2024

Accepted: June 28, 2024

Online Published: July 25, 2024

doi:10.22158/wjssr.v11n3p12

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjssr.v11n3p12>

Abstract

Revolutions face significant challenges—entrenched power structures, superior military forces, and deep-seated social injustices. While much focus is placed on the physical aspects of revolts, the role of rhetoric remains underexplored. This paper investigates the role of rhetoric in the Haitian and Cuban revolutions by examining the speeches of the Toussaint Louverture and Fidel Castro. Both leaders skillfully employed rhetorical techniques to rally support against global superpowers. Louverture emphasized universal rights to bridge divides between enslaved Africans and free people of color. Castro took a similar approach, referring to universal values such as “justice”, “freedom”, and “liberty”, but tied them around toppling a common enemy to appeal to the anti-dictatorship sentiments of Cuban citizens. Moreover, both leaders compared their revolutions to common allusions that their populace understood. Louverture’s use of biblical allusions and Castro’s reference to the Greco-Persian Wars fostered a collective sense of duty that extended beyond the revolution. To this extent, this comparative analysis highlights the use of rhetoric in the Haitian and Cuban revolutions and underscores the indispensable role of rhetoric in revolutions.

Keywords

revolution, rhetoric, Louverture, Castro, Haitian, Cuban, universal, rights

1. Introduction

Revolutions confront formidable odds—entrenched power structures, superior military forces, and deep-seated social injustices. To surmount these challenges, scholars have continuously examined the physical components of revolts while overlooking the intangible: rhetoric. This paper analyzes the rhetorical proficiency of two leaders, Toussaint Louverture and Fidel Castro, in the Haitian and Cuban revolutions respectively. Despite circumstantial discrepancies, both figures expertly wielded their

rhetorical prowess to galvanize the masses and stage rebellions. Their works, ripe with riveting metaphors, constructed narratives that unified the public and riled momentum for war. In this essay, I will delve into the influence of their rhetorical techniques and tendencies on stirring up revolution. Then, I will infer the macro level role of rhetoric on revolution, more broadly, using the Haitian and Cuban revolutions as case studies.

2. The Haitian Revolution

2.1 Historical Context

The Haitian Revolution, a decade of slave revolts in Saint-Domingue, stands as an indelible mark for revolutions globally. Today, it is recognized as the earliest successful slave revolt in history, culminating in the establishment of the first independent state ruled by people of African descent (Gardea, 2018). In the late 18th century, Saint-Domingue, modern-day Haiti, emerged as the wealthiest colony of the French empire on the back of extensive slave plantations which expeditiously produced and exported valuable crop yields, notably sugar, coffee, and cotton (Woodward, 1959). However, beneath the wealth, enslaved Africans were shackled to toiling conditions on plantations; individuals were subject to protracted working hours withstanding intense tropical heat without any rest or nourishment. Despite the unsettling rate of fatality among slaves, production continued unabated under a gruesome cycle: deceased or incapacitated slaves were thrown to the wayside and replaced by a steady flow of newly imported Africans. Due to the mass importation of slaves in Saint-Domingue, the enslaved population grew to over 500,000, outnumbering the remaining demographic by a ratio of five to one. Thus, glaring social inequalities and disproportionate demographics set the stage for the era of conflict to come (Woodward).

2.2 Revolutionary Events

In 1789, the National Constituent Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, outlining a series of universal rights granted to all men, although ambiguity about whether slaves received those rights remained. Two years later, the assembly passed the decree of May 15th, clarifying that gens de couleur (free people of color) were granted all political rights while excluding slaves. In response to this exclusion, nearly 100,000 enslaved Blacks in the same year revolted against their white masters in the pursuit of emancipation (Woodward, 1959). In the ensuing years, Saint-Domingue fell into a state of political strife; the conflicting social groups ravaged plantation grounds and murdered their respective opposition (Woodward). Faced with the looming prospect of losing control over Saint-Domingue due to internal violence, as well as opportunistic British and Spanish invaders, France ratified the abolition of slavery in 1794 which quelled fighting in the interim (Knight, 2000). In the aftermath, Haitian military general Toussaint Louverture established the Haitian constitution, effectively abolishing slavery in the colony (Knight).

Regrettably, Haitian stability was ephemeral. In 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte, France's newly self-appointed dictator, sought to restore control over the 'autonomous' colony by dispatching an expeditionary force to rescind prior laws and reinstate slavery (Knight, 2000). French forces swiftly toppled Haitian resistance, capturing and sending Louverture to prison in France, where he died in 1803 (Knight). Nonetheless, defiance persisted under the leadership of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Louverture's former lieutenant, who reframed the struggle to a vision of Haitian independence. Ultimately, the yellow fever epidemic and ceaseless violence necessitated French retreat, leading to the declaration of Haitian independence on the dawn of 1804 (Knight).

3. The Cuban Revolution

3.1 Historical Context

Approximately a century-and-a-half later, Cuba, another island nation merely 50 miles off the Haitian coast, found itself embroiled in its own struggle for autonomy; this time, their adversary, instead of being a traditional European nation, was the United States, a burgeoning power widely recognized as the hegemon post-World War II. The Cuban Revolution occurred during the 1950s and led to the overthrow of the US-backed Batista regime, establishing the first socialist state in the Western hemisphere following decades of mounting public dissatisfaction. These sentiments emerged from Fulgencio Batista's obstruction of Cuba's democratic systems, including the constitution, Congress, and civil liberties, as well as his neglect for the rampant inequality in the nation (Thomas, 1963). Confronted with increasing indications of economic turmoil and political repression, revolutionaries believed that violence was the only recourse. United under the socialist leadership of Fidel Castro, they rallied under a collective goal: to topple the Batista regime.

3.2 Revolutionary Events

In 1953, Castro conducted an ambitious invasion on the Moncada Barracks, the second largest military base in Cuba; with him, a modest force of 150 revolutionaries ("Castro's Failed Coup", 2023). In the ensuing confrontation, Castro's militia was quickly squashed by a superior military force. Although unsuccessful, the insurgency cemented Castro's stature as the leading figure of resistance, signaling the start of the Cuban Revolution ("Castro's Failed Coup"). In the aftermath of the invasion, Castro stood trial. There, he delivered his famous "History Will Absolve Me" speech which painted a renewed vision of Cuba, absent the systemic issues plaguing the nation ("Castro's Failed Coup"). Castro's epideictic rhetoric would become the rallying cry for the revolutionary movement, resonating with a populace longing for regime change. Castro was sentenced to 15 years in prison, but released less than two years later due to mounting pressure for the amnesty of political prisoners in Cuba ("Castro's Failed Coup"). Upon adapting newfound guerilla warfare tactics, Castro's revolutionaries gained momentum; waning support for Batista, along with critical victories such as Sierra Maestra, La Plata, Las Mercedes, and

Santa Clara spelled the end of the regime.

4. Rhetorical Strategies

4.1 Toussaint Louverture's Rhetoric

Despite differences in circumstances, Toussaint Louverture and Fidel Castro, the respective leaders of their revolts, possessed a common understanding of the importance of rhetoric in writings and speeches. This was used to galvanize the masses of supporters necessary to topple the aforementioned global powers, France and the United States. Leaders, whether intentionally or not, centered the goal of rebellion around broad objectives that the bulk of the population shared, as opposed to nuanced policy solutions that only select factions would acknowledge. Since goals were derived from universally accepted ideas, they could be interpreted slightly differently to fit the ideologies of distinct groups. This nuance was imperative because it helped to reconcile differences among opposing social groups who were unwilling to cooperate with one another due to diverging opinions on solutions to pressing issues. Thus, while small-scale revolts devised by individual groups were futile, minor adjustments in the phrasing of revolutionary goals allowed leaders to attract a broader audience, which I will demonstrate in the context of Haiti and Cuba.

In the case of Haiti, Louverture tailored his rhetoric to slaves and *gen de couleurs*, groups with contrasting viewpoints. Diverging perspectives, stemming from monetary and social disputes, caused animosity between the two factions. *Gen de couleurs*, many of whom owned slaves, opposed the abolition of slavery as it served as a vital source of income and social stature within class divisions. Conversely, enslaved Africans demanded the eradication of slavery, which deprived them of their fundamental rights and freedoms. In his earliest public proclamation, Louverture averted disputes by reframing efforts from solely emancipation to broader objectives of "liberty and equality". (Aristide, 2019). He structured revolutionary activities around opposing racial discrimination and social injustices, which affected all black Africans, not just the enslaved. Under this context, Louverture could justify the abolition of slavery to *gens de couleurs* as a step towards racial equality that would benefit their own social standing, garnering their allegiance. Although it is unknown whether Louverture's choice of words was intentionally designed to entice liberated Blacks, his constant mentions of unity without infighting, such as the rhetorical question, "fight with us for the same cause [...] Is it possible that we could destroy ourselves [...] all fighting for the same cause?" suggest this was done deliberately (Aristide, p. 34). Regardless, Louverture's decisive rhetoric set the stage for Haiti's relentless resistance against colonial rule, even beyond his own lifetime (Joseph, 2020).

4.2 Fidel Castro's Rhetoric

In the midst of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro employed a similar strategy with an added nuance; not only did he frequently mention universal values such as "justice", "freedom", and "liberty", he also

tied their acquisition to toppling a common enemy (Castro, 1953). This approach was exhibited in Castro's infamous speech, "History Will Absolve Me", an oration during his trial that followed his failed assault on Moncada Barracks. There, he proclaimed, "Cuba should be the bulwark of liberty and not a shameful link in the chain of despotism" (Castro, para. 68). By addressing these two seemingly distinct subjects in conjunction, Castro's rhetoric turned the generalities of universal truths into tangible experiences; Cubans could picture dictator Fulgencio Batista's physical appearance and experienced the abuses he perpetrated. Upon setting up this narrative, Castro captivated Cubans simply by taking an anti-Batista stance, which created a striking difference between himself and not just Batista, but Cuba's longstanding history of dictators, including Gerardo Machado, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, and Ramón Grau San Martín. His criticisms of Batista reflected the sentiments of the public, who refrained from expressing those views to avoid reprisal. In contrast to previous candidates, Castro's ideology was a breath of fresh air for the public: he was not yet another power-hungry despot, but a figure positively received for his campaign to restore virtue in Cuba.

Within this narrative, Castro strategically concealed his personal agenda for Cuba. The populace rallied behind him, not because of his merits or plans, but by the way he embodied their collective indignation of tyranny (Kice, 2008). Castro would utilize this nuanced distinction to build the foundation for his ultimate plan of a socialist Cuba. Had he been upfront about his ideologies in the midst of the revolt, it might have alienated supporters with incompatible beliefs and sparked internal strife among followers, significantly hampering his ability to seize control of Cuba. Understanding these implications, Castro would announce his allegiance to Marxism-Leninism, and his intent to build a communist Cuba, only after ousting the Batista regime and attaining undisputed authority over the nation (Ring, 1961; "When Castro Became a Communist", 1997). Regrettably, in a tragic demonstration of anacyclosis, the Polybian theory for the cyclical state of civilization that plagued Cuba's history, Castro would later employ the same inhumane tactics he rebelled against to suppress political dissent. Cubans who dared to voice defiance against Castro would be imprisoned, exiled, or even worse, executed. Through Castro's masterful manipulation of political rhetoric, he deceived an entire nation into blindly following his orders, cementing his reign for decades to come.

5. Metaphors in Rhetoric

5.1 Castro's Use of Metaphor

While it is tempting to characterize Cuban revolutionaries as naive in hindsight, much of this effect should be attributed to Castro's metaphorical reframing of Cuban society, which blurred the line between perception and reality. In his speech, "This is Democracy", delivered on May 1, 1960, Castro used the ancient Battle of Thermopylae, a major battle of the Greco-Persian Wars, as an allegory of Cuban defense against invasion from the United States (Castro, 1960). Castro proclaimed that in 480

B.C., a confrontation occurred between an overwhelming Persian force, ranging from 300,000 to 5 million soldiers, and an under-armed Spartan militia of 300 troops near Thermopylae, on the border of Greece (most reputable scholars now acknowledge that these numbers are greatly exaggerated) (Kice, 2008). Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Grecian soldiers miraculously repelled the Persian intruders for several days, with soldiers upholding a fight-or-die mindset (Kice). Similarly, although Cuba had just experienced regime change a year prior, it was set to face off against the most powerful military of the 20th century, the United States.

Recognizing this, Castro drew parallels between the Battle of Thermopylae and the then present day to portray a narrative of the ‘underdog.’ In his proclamation, he repeatedly referred to the Cuban public as “Spartans” (Castro, 1960, para. 9, 54, 74). This renewed Cuban identity reshaped the negative connotation of the state, which emerged from decades of historical abuse, into one they would defend. These sentiments were evident in Castro’s closing remarks, where he noted, “here lie 300 Spartans, who preferred death to surrender”, in reference to the Spartans that defended Thermopylae (Castro, para. 74). This rhetoric, which justified sacrifice to protect the state, united the public by transforming the upcoming war into a collective effort greater than any individual person (Kice, 2008). Castro encouraged this inclination by glorifying soldiers that would have made the sacrifice, which was much needed for the island nation facing a formidable foe (Kice). Moreover, the depiction directly supplements the aforementioned implications of goal selection. By this, the allegory enabled Castro to control public perception by highlighting some aspects while obscuring others. Despite its complexities, its allegorical representation made the event easier to understand; it categorized the moving parts of the rebellion into a straightforward “good versus evil” narrative, uniting citizens against a common enemy—in this instance, the United States.

5.2 Louverture’s Use of Metaphor

In a similar fashion, Toussaint Louverture utilized metaphors to communicate abstract principles of the Haitian Revolution in a tangible manner. In a public proclamation, Louverture declares, “the moment has arrived when the veil obscuring the light must fall” (Aristide, 2019, p. 44). The statement serves as a powerful trope for the Haitian agenda. The “veil” symbolizes the racial discrimination against Blacks and the “light” stands for their liberation. The intentional use of “must” suggests Louverture’s staunch conviction that rebellion was bound to succeed, possibly inferring religious overtones with God. Although somewhat arbitrary, the statement, “the moment has arrived” embodies Louverture’s sense of urgency, which, when read in conjunction, becomes a rallying cry for insurrection.

In another announcement to the Haitian militia, Louverture stressed the necessity of revolution to “break” the “chains [...] of slavery” (Aristide, 2019, p. 57). Here, the influence of religion is more pronounced. His speech is littered with biblical metaphors, such as the “sacred flame” and the “yoke of slavery.” along with explicit references to God, affirming, “we seek only to bring to men the liberty that

[God] has given them, and that other men have taken from them only by transgressing His immutable will” (Aristide, 57). The religious inflection recurrent in Louverture’s speech profoundly affected slaves; it emboldened Catholic-converted Blacks to resist systems of oppression not just in self-interest, but to stand in line with God (Edwards, 2021). Past their initial interpretations, Louverture’s recurring use of religious rhetoric unveils his broader perspective of the Haitian Revolution: that rebellion was bound to succeed because it was an extension of God’s “immutable will” that all individuals are born equal.

6. The Utility of Rhetoric in Revolutions

It is unclear whether the two revolutionary figures, Toussaint Louverture and Fidel Castro, bore much influence from each other, given that the revolutions occurred nearly two centuries apart. Despite this, analyzing the Haitian and Cuban revolts in tandem offers a comprehensive understanding of the role that rhetoric plays in rebellion. The imbalance of power—characterized by a stark disparity in financial resources, military preparation, and weaponry—between the populace and the regime places revolutionaries at an inherent disadvantage. To rectify this, insurrections prioritize galvanizing the masses to amass a following large enough to offset the power advantage of the existing regime. In practice, Toussaint Louverture and Fidel Castro prioritized rhetorical proficiency for a similar intention: to reach and inspire the masses. They understood that employing rhetoric strategically was crucial in communicating their ideas to the populace. To this extent, I posit that the role of rhetorical proficiency in a rebellion is to unify and bring purpose to a struggling population through a common identity. Without rhetorical prowess, the chance of revolutionary success would fade as the public would be directionless.

Specifically, rhetoric unifies the revolutionary party by clarifying the role of the citizenry and emphasizing the objectives of the revolution. To amass a sufficient following, it is necessary that parties entice a diverse array of groups with incompatible interests and disparate circumstances. Accordingly, the position of a revolutionary leader is to foster unity among clashing factions. In these cases, deliberate rhetorical choices make or break a revolt: minor shifts in rhetoric allow leaders to frame goals within the framework of universally accepted principles, liberties and freedoms, that all parties support. Further, these broad principles are rooted in everyday metaphorical depictions that supporters can resonate with. To this extent, clarity in the delivery of revolutionary activities bridges the ideological gap between the leader and its citizenry. It ensures that the revolutionary body works in sync and guarantees that every individual can contribute their share of labor.

Additionally, rhetorical proficiency inspires prospective participants to join the cause. Revolting is a daunting task, made up of violence, upheaval, and disorder, but rhetorically proficient leaders can use precise rhetoric to distort perception. As aforementioned, Castro’s speech, “This is Democracy” glorified the Spartan soldiers at Thermopylae to obfuscate Cuba’s poor political status. The evocative

story, along with Castro's imposing speeches, boosted the outcome of the cause above the individual soldier. By tapering with perception and reality, leaders assume authoritative power to carefully curate the narratives that citizens acknowledge. Thus, rhetoric is more than just words; it serves as a facade, designed by revolutionary leaders to motivate troop enlistment under a collective cry for change.

7. Conclusion

Although rhetoric is seldom discussed in scholarly circles, its connection to rebellion should not be understated (Kice, 2008). Case studies of the Haitian Revolution and the Cuban Revolution, led by Louverture and Castro respectively, affirm the power of rhetoric in successful revolts. Their ability to marshal groups of unassuming rebels to topple the most powerful nations of their eras, France and the United States, is a testament to their rhetorical mastery. Despite divergent circumstances, both leaders tailored their rhetoric to the socioeconomic conditions of their times: Louverture championed liberty and equality, uniting Haitian Blacks, while Castro used emotive storytelling to connect with the wider Cuban population. However, their similarities far outweighed those nuances: both framed the goals of rebellion around universal truths, enriched by compelling metaphors, to effectively inspire the masses. Thus, the use of rhetoric is indistinguishable from the discourse around revolt.

References

- Aristide, J.-B. (2019). *Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Haitian Revolution*. Verso.
- Castro, F. (1953, October 16). History will absolve me [Transcript]. (P. Álvarez Tabó & A. P. Booth, Trans.). *Marxists* (1997). Retrieved July 11, 2023, from <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1953/10/16.htm>
- Castro, F. (1960, May 1). Castro address on 1 May 1960 [Transcript]. *Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Foreign Relations*. Latin American Network Information Center. Retrieved July 11, 2023, from <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1960/19600501.html>
- Edwards, E. J. (2021). Christianity's role in colonial and revolutionary Haiti. *Studies in Religion and the Enlightenment*. Retrieved July 12, 2023, from <https://www.srejournal.org/2021/03/10/christianitys-role-in-colonial-and-revolutionary-haiti/>
- Gardea, A. (2018). *Recipe for rebellion: A closer look at the Haitian Revolution*. California State University, Long Beach. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/pg15bh41h>
- Institute for U.S.-Cuba Relations. (1997). When Castro became a communist: The impact on U.S.-Cuba policy. *Institute for U.S.-Cuba Relations*, 1(1). Retrieved July 12, 2023, from <https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/diaz-verson.htm>
- Joseph, C. L. (2020). *Revolutionary Change and Democratic Religion: Christianity, Vodou, and Secularism*. Pickwick Publications.

- Kice, B. C. (2008). *From the mountains to the podium: The rhetoric of Fidel Castro* (Doctoral dissertation). Louisiana State University. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/1766
- Knight, F. W. (2000). The Haitian Revolution. *The American Historical Review*, 105(1), 103-115. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2652438>
- Public Broadcasting Service. (n.d.). *Castro's failed coup*. Retrieved July 11, 2023, from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/castro-failed-coup-moncada-barracks/>
- Ring, H. (1961, December 26). Castro's speech on Marxism-Leninism. *The Militant*, 25(47), 1. Retrieved July 12, 2023, from <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1961/v25n47-dec-25-1961-mil.pdf>
- Thomas, H. (1963). The origins of the Cuban Revolution. *The World Today*, 19(10), 448-460. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40393452>
- Woodward, I. A. (1959). Toussaint Louverture and the struggle of his people against revolutionary France and Napoleon. *Negro History Bulletin*, 23(3), 51-56. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44213434>